

Homer goes to Hollywood

Joanna Paul

If all goes to plan in the chaotic world of filmmaking, then May 2004 should see the arrival in cinemas of the blockbuster *Troy*. While the prospect of Brad Pitt playing the Achaean hero Achilles in a leather miniskirt may be excitement enough for many cinema-goers, there are plenty of other reasons why we might await this film with eager anticipation. Over three years ago, *Gladiator* signalled Hollywood's renewed fascination with antiquity; now, with *Troy* and other movies currently in production (such as the two *Alexander the Great* projects), we will finally see whether there is to be a renaissance of cinematic interest in the ancient world to rival the 'sword and sandal' epics of the fifties and sixties. Moreover, *Troy* – through its account of the story of the Trojan War – will encourage us to think about how our modern art form of cinema can use (or abuse) the most ancient texts in Western literature, the Homeric poems.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have for centuries provided inspiration for poets and playwrights, novelists and painters. Filmmakers too have often turned to the ancient epics for material. As early as 1911 Italian silent movies like *La Caduta di Troia* (*The Fall of Troy*) and *L'Odissea* (*The Odyssey*) were great successes. A few decades later, when ancient world films like *Quo Vadis?* (1951) and *Ben-Hur* (1959) were immensely popular, it was no surprise that Homer should also make an appearance on the silver screen. In 1956 Robert Wise directed *Helen of Troy* which, in its trailer, promised to tell of 'All the Storied Wonders of Homer's Immortal *Iliad*!' Of course, any viewer who expected a close reproduction of Homer's poem was likely to be disappointed, but was also missing the point. Cinematic adaptation of literary texts offers is never a simple process of translation from page to screen, and offers the filmmaker a series of challenges or, more positively, opportunities.

Adapting to the silver screen

The challenges that the *Iliad* presents to the scriptwriter are numerous. Full repetition of the poem's long speeches does not transfer well to the screen. In *Helen of Troy*, these are cut in favour of quicker-flowing dialogue, including such lumbering lines as (from Paris to Helen), 'Tonight there are only you and I, under the magic of the moonlight.' Also problematic for the scriptwriter is the narrative structure: the *Iliad* is notorious for covering only fifty-two days out of the decade long Trojan War (and Books 2 to 23 only account for four days). In antiquity, it could be safely assumed that audiences of the poems would know at least the general outlines of the whole story of the war, understanding the background to the events of the *Iliad* as well as knowing what would happen later. Modern cinema audiences need far more of this information supplied to them and built into the plot. *Helen of Troy* had to extend the Homeric narrative dramatically, and present audiences with the complete story of the Trojan War, starting with Paris' capture of Helen – an event which, in the film, is shown to be prompted by a Trojan diplomatic visit to Sparta, with no mention of the traditional Judgment of Paris. The title change is significant too, since '*Helen of Troy*' was likely to mean more to audiences than the Homeric title, the *Iliad*.

A more recent version of a Homeric epic – *The Odyssey* (made in 1997 as a two-part TV film) – also reveals some of the challenges of bringing the poem to the screen. The characterisation of Odysseus fails to convey his complex heroism and his desire

for home, and the film's depiction of the supernatural seems to miss some of the possibilities offered by special effects. Like *Helen of Troy*, *The Odyssey* also struggles with the narrative pattern of the original. A distinctive feature of Homer's *Odyssey* is that it plunges into the middle of things. When the poem opens, Odysseus is already halfway home, stranded on Calypso's island, and we learn about what happened to him earlier through his long speech to the Phaeacians (Books 8–12). Since flashback is a common cinematic device, we might have expected the film to reproduce Homer's structure; instead, it depicts all the events in chronological succession, from Odysseus' exploits at Troy and his wanderings, to his return home and defeat of the suitors.

The recipe for success: Kirk Douglas and Ulysses

Even if we may find *Helen of Troy* and *The Odyssey* disappointing, this is not because they lack fidelity to the original epics, but rather because they do not fully exploit the creative opportunities offered by the adaptation of epic to film. A good filmmaker or scriptwriter will realise that important elements of the text can be successfully brought to screen in imaginative and unexpected ways. So it is that the most critically acclaimed film of a Homeric epic – *Ulysses* (1954, starring Kirk Douglas as the hero Ulysses) – also seems to take the most liberties with Homer. This film also sees difficulties in transferring Homer's narrative onto the screen, but works out effective solutions to the problems. Since including every episode of Homer's *Odyssey* makes for an excessively long, episodic film, *Ulysses* manipulates the narrative, but without sacrificing the important themes of the poem.

Some episodes from Homer are omitted: the games on Phaeacia, for example, or Odysseus's encounter with the Laestrygonians. Though these are entertaining, they are not vital for advancing the narrative. Some characters are combined – there is no Calypso, for example, but the character of Circe instead stands for both women who hinder Odysseus' homecoming. Circe in the film offers Ulysses immortality, as Calypso does in the poem. Other episodes are condensed. In Homer, Odysseus' trip to the Underworld, where he encounters his dead comrades and family, is an important part of the narrative, but it would take a long time to depict on film. Therefore *Ulysses* has Circe simply summon the shades from Hades directly to her, instead of sending Ulysses on a long voyage. Finally, important themes which are gradually asserted and reinforced in Homer – such as Odysseus' desire for homecoming – are conveyed swiftly in the film, by making the captivating Sirens sing with the voices of Penelope and Telemachus to entice Ulysses. Although not an accurate reproduction of the episode in Homer, for the film it is a dramatically efficient way of expressing the Homeric motif of Odysseus' intense longing for Ithaca and his family.

Looking forward to Troy

Early reports on *Troy* make it clear that this film also has confronted massive challenges in bringing Homer to the screen. In interviews, the scriptwriter David Benioff explains that his film, like *Helen of Troy*, covers the story of the entire Trojan War, extending far beyond the reaches of the *Iliad*. '*There is no such thing as a faithful adaptation*', he says. '*Every adaptation*

requires that the screenwriter make difficult choices'. This comment is important when we consider how ancient texts – indeed, any texts – might be adapted for the screen, and leaves us pondering the question: when Homer sets out for Hollywood, how far does he get? Films of the *Odyssey* have cut and twisted the story, while movies about Troy seem to end up devoting more time to what is not in the *Iliad* than what is in it. But it is undeniable that Homer's epics provide springboards for successful films. As oral poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are more than just the texts we have today; they are stories that evolved and mutated before they were written down, and filmmakers today continue this process of evolution. What we can hope for is a film that will treat the great themes and dramatic power of Homer with reverence – as *Ulysses* successfully depicts the tormented hero desperately trying to reach home without copying the *Odyssey* word for word, so we can hope that *Troy* will show us the complexities of martial heroism and the brutality of war. This is where the voice of the Homeric epics still has relevance today. The road from ancient Greece to Hollywood is not an easy one, but it is nevertheless a worthwhile journey to make.

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Troy on the web:

<http://detrojanischekrieg.de/> is in German, but it is the only real 'fan-site' for the film so far, and has plenty of pictures of the production. Similarly, the fan-site for Sean Bean (*Troy*'s Odysseus) also has an extensive archive of press stories on *Troy* (<http://www.compleatseanbean.com/troy-press.html>).